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## OVID

Judging by the articles mentioned in Poole's index the interest in Ovid as a subject for general literary consideration passed away with the generation whose college training was largely based on the ancient classics. Once an imperial favorite, the bearer of a great name among the men of his day, one of the few authors who voice the sorrows of an unforgiven exile, there are some elements in his character and in his works such as are not to be found in any other writers or writings of Rome. Though among the Romans of his day there were greater characters and more regnant spirits, yet his poetry is Rome's best example of a certain type, and though a poet of the Decline it will not be amiss to set forth something of his history and of his work.

Publius Ovidius Naso was born at Sulmo in Umbria, about ninety miles east of Rome, in 43 B.C., the year which saw the death, at the battle of Mutina, of Hirtius and Pansa, the last of the freely elected consuls at Rome, and the year in which free eloquence came to an end with the death of Cicero. He has given us his own history from which we learn that he was one

. . . condemned in spite  
Of nature and his stars to write,

and though by the advice of his father he took up the study of law, the task was irksome, and he wearied of the wordy forum. But when he was twenty the death of his brother left him free to follow the bent of his inclinations, and he took up poetry as his avocation. Rich and fluent of speech, he turned his attention to personal themes and wrote his "Loves" and "The Art of Love," and then like a true sophist he produced a "Remedy for Love." In his later years he frankly admitted that these were jocose works, the sportive effusions of his early years, and had he died immediately after they were written they would have passed to oblivion with most of the poetry of that generation. But they won for him a recognized position among the literary masters of Rome so many of whom like himself were provincial sprung,

he passed to higher themes, fell under the displeasure of Augustus and was banished. The causes of this banishment is the mystery in the life of Ovid, and his early works are valuable only as they furnish an interpretative standpoint for a consideration of the causes of his exile.

A court favorite in the year 7 A.D., a year later he was banished to Tomi on the coast of the Black Sea, and here he died in 17 A.D. after he had exhausted all his literary resources in efforts to secure his recall, though in all he wrote there is an enforced reticence in regard to the immediate cause of his banishment, nor is there anything bearing on the question to be found in the history of the inscrutable Augustus. Somehow, somewhere, the poet probably crossed the path of the emperor in his ostensible search for virtue, and Augustus threw him to one side. The private and the public characters displayed in Augustus did not clash. If we may believe all that has been written of him, in his immoralities he was not better than others of his day. He drifted freely with the current of his passions, and his last words to his wife, *Vive memor nostri coniugii et vale* ("Live mindful of our wedlock and farewell"), could recall to her mind no noble picture of the past fidelity of her august lord. Yet there were certain objective aims which to him were perfectly plain: To find Rome brick and leave it marble was a consummation worthy of his most earnest efforts; to find it immoral and to leave it moral was a still higher ideal, and it was to the attainment of this that his most noted legislation was directed. Old landmarks political and moral had passed away, and though there were suppressed mutterings among the people, most men were content to bask in the glow of the new imperialism. Twice was universal peace proclaimed, and it was only near the close of his reign that Roman military success was dimmed by the crushing defeat of Varus by the Germans under Hermann. The transformation of Rome from brick to marble was an index of the economic improvements, while in literary matters the expression of the imperialistic idealism of Vergil, of the Epicurean acquiescence of Horace, and the exaltation of the greatness of Rome by Livy mark the culmination of Roman literary work in the epic, the lyric, and, from a rhetorical standpoint, in historical composition.

But strangely contrasted with this external brilliancy of the court of Augustus was the character of his own family on two of whom he found opportunity to inflict deserved chastisement. Tacitus briefly tells us that among the events of 14 A.D. was the death of Julia, long ago banished by her father because of her immorality, and fourteen years later he records the death of her daughter Julia, who had also been banished and for the same reason. This is but a brief record for a member of the imperial family, and around it has been woven many a fine web of conjecture which connects Ovid with the causes of Julia's fall.

Up to a certain point Ovid himself is perfectly frank in regard to the causes of his banishment to which he refers more frequently in his later works than to any other subject. The primal cause which had wrought his ruin was his "Art," his books, his muse, his genius. The act itself was an error, not a crime, unless a delinquency in respect to the gods be called a crime. It was foolish, not criminal, nor was it forbidden by the laws. In the poem which gives an elaborate presentation of the question, Ovid arraigns Cupid, for exile had been the reward for services in the art of love. In his reply Cupid says there was something else involved. Elsewhere Ovid mentions his eyes as the unwitting cause of his fall as if they had seen something not lawful to utter. This would seem to connect his banishment with some knowledge which he had of the imperial family, and can be associated with the defense of his poetry that it had been written for wantons and had been misused as he had not designed. This, however, does not decide what the "something else" was, and it must forever remain the indeterminate  $x$  in the problem of Ovid's banishment.

Of the exiles from Rome Cicero is the best known to us from the letters which he wrote at that time. Repinings, complainings, and anticipations are thickest in what he wrote to his friends. He felt that he could not live away from Rome, for away from the forum his occupation was gone, and unoccupied he cared not to be. His wailings are subjective, while those in the epistles which Ovid sent back from Pontus are objective and due to the rigors of the place to which he had come. We must admit that our sympathies are with Ovid rather than with Cicero who had taken up his abode in a place in which Greek culture had been at

home for some centuries, and in which we may imagine there were many who looked at Cicero as the representative of a crude civilization. Ovid had been sent to a place where there was nought but barbarism, and where everything must have grated harshly on the feelings of one accustomed to the luxurious ways of Rome. The cold encyclopedic facts about the place of exile shows that he had good grounds for complaint, and the picture which he draws is certainly repellant.

On the borders of the world, by the banks of the Danube, stood a fort looking out over desolate plains which lay unplowed. No willows grew green by the river's banks, no elms were covered with the gemmed vines, but wormwood seemed the sole product of the land. Here was the native heath of the north wind, and the good south wind but rarely blew. In winter, across the Danube the Sarmatian oxen drew the creaking carts, and strangest of all, what Ovid himself could scarcely believe, he had seen the mighty waters covered with a sheet of ice, and had walked upon a hardened sea. The people were as abnormal as the place itself. Dressed in skins and breeches, veritable images of Mars, their faces alone showed through locks rattling from the hanging ice, or beards glistening with the settled frost. Fiercer than wolves, scarcely worthy of the name of men, not slow to use the knife which each one wore at his side, they regarded no law, and justice yielded to strength. Inside the fort, Ovid, changed into a soldier, took his turn as guard, but powerless to protect the land as it was harried by the barbarian horse. But in course of time he became less averse to the people, learned their language, and wrote for them a poem in honor of Augustus. In such a place it is not strange that he bewails the sluggishness of his intellect in words akin to those of Byron in "*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*:"

. . . I am not now  
That which I have been — and my visions flit  
Less palpably before me — and the glow  
Which in my spirit dwelt is fluttering, faint and low.

Not even the old man pronounced wisest by Apollo could have written any work under such conditions, nor would Homer have been able to sing his song. He did not write in gardens as he

once had done; he felt the need of quiet and retirement for his song, and now and then expresses a fear, perhaps merely a literary shudder, that he might forget his native tongue.

Living continuously in arms, with dangers thronging about him in his dreams, physically the ruin of his former self, he kept up his courage till at the succession of Tiberius who could be not softened by any pleas his last hopes passed away. Still in those days of weary waiting and watching there were some things which were a consolation to him. Temperate in food and drink his faith in his better self remained unshaken. He rejoiced that the Ister had nothing greater than his intellect; that he had had a great name when he was numbered with the living at Rome, though now like many a hero of antiquity made conspicuous by his ruin. Then too there were some pleasant recollections of the past. At Rome there were still two or three friends who gave him help when others refused to stretch out a hand to save him as he struggled on the deep, and these he summoned in his imagination and with them lived once more the scenes passed through: saw once more the magnificent cities of Asia; marked again the sky glowing with Ætna's fire; plowed once more in pictured craft the azure deep, or passed the days in converse sweet. Call it devotion or call it unmanliness, he longed for Rome and to flee from the Scythian land; but when we take into consideration the fact that he had fared sumptuously every day; that he had been accustomed to a sunny clime and to a dress that permitted an æsthetic expression of the movements of the body, it is not strange that the land to him seemed the abomination of desolation. In a civilized country we have seen it fifty degrees below zero, while gentle Borean zephyrs were piling the snow in drifts in which great engines stuck, but we prefer the memory to a repeated experience such as was that of Ovid as the years went by. Long he maintained his courage and we may think of him as of the mother in the fine picture drawn by the ancient poet, who, as she is waiting, keeps her wistful gaze turned towards the sea over whose waters her son has long been delayed. Like her, Ovid watched long and in vain, for the glad tidings of release never came, and he died and was buried in the land of his exile.

Ovid has been termed by Seneca the most ingenious of poets

but descending to boyish trifles, while Quintilian criticises him for indulging in, rather than ruling, his inclinations. Psychically he was akin to the rhetorical sophists who knew how to dress up elaborate trifles in gorgeous robes, and from his kinship to these he is not to be taken too seriously in most of his works. His earlier works are all amoric, and whether he is writing of the unrequited loves of heroines or his own putative experiences, there are the same indications of surfaceness. It was his own lack of experience that led him in his "Heroines" to speak as a Nestor in the delineation of their lovelornness. The character of the imagery and the limitations in concrete examples show his own lack of emotional nurture. They are many and yet but one, and though their surroundings may be different, the tone is for all the same and the conjured woes of one slightly differently set forth answers for them all.

"The subject matter of the 'Loves,'" says Teuffel, "was furnished by the poet's own life, though he shaped it according to his own personal fancy." Professor Sellar writes, "With Ovid love poetry is a study of psychological observation. . . . He is the poet of fashionable society in its laxest moods. . . . His heroine (Corinna) simply serves as the theme of Ovid's poetry in which he traces the course of an ordinary intrigue." But judging by the simplicity in details and the ingenuousness shown in its progress, the story may have been due merely to the workings of a perverted imagination, and Ovid ought to have seen that a love so smooth needed no poetical heralding to a society which had read of the tempestuous passions of Catullus, and the intensity of Propertius and Tibullus. Like these writers Ovid chose a fictitious name about which to group a number of amoric possibilities in a colorless series of erotic effusions. Considering the work as a whole it is studied in its beginning, vapid in its ending, devoid of the intensity which marks the works of the erotic masters among the Romans and is in every way inferior to theirs; and when once read it calls for no further notice, except for questions which are independent of its quality.

The letters from the heroines have the same limitations. Of these the manuscripts have twenty-one, but the last six are evidently the work of later writers who had not learned the art

of bringing wailings within proper bounds. The longest, three hundred and seventy-six lines, is altogether too long and too diffuse to be genuine. The authenticity of some of the fifteen generally accepted as genuine has been questioned, and it is one of the most curious facts connected with the study of the works of antiquity that critics do not have that acumen which can inerrantly separate the dross from the gold; or perhaps it may be that the originals were so lacking in native timbre that poetastic rhetoricians found no difficulty in inserting spurious lines and in deceiving the elect by their imitations. The subject matter of the *Heroides* was susceptible of imitative treatment, as the characters are all bookish, and ready for any one apt in the verbal adornment of surface phases of emotion. Matthew Arnold declares in his well-known Essay on Poetry, "Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent . . . than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. . . But if we have any tact we shall find them . . . an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them. Short passages, even single lines will serve our turn sufficiently." And again "The substance and the matter of the best poetry acquire their special character from possessing, in an eminent degree, truth and seriousness." These may be satisfactory tests to measure the heights, and it may be true that we may acquire "a sense enabling us, whatever poetry may be laid before us, to feel the degree in which a high poetic quality is present or wanting there." If there can be this general test for the heights of poetry, there ought to be some tests for individualism as well. But even good Homer sometimes nods, and we ask criticism for a determination of these nutative periods, as well as of the highest points in poetic expression. It may be that there is no real Ovidian stamp that cannot be counterfeited, and that the *Heroides* must be taken as a work entirely mediocre and therefore imitable by all poetical mediocrity. Be this as it may for this work, the characteristics of Ovid are best displayed in the *Metamorphoses*.

In the time of Ovid the mass of mythological lore furnished as



good subjects for Wonderbooks and Tanglewood Tales as at the present time. The interest of Ovid in these is altogether poetical. They were merely subjects for metrical adornment, and he sets them forth in a verse more fluent than any which had yet been written by a Roman; and long before a close analysis of his verses had revealed the large proportion of dactyls compared with the spondees many a school boy had learned that a lesson in Ovid was a journey on Easy Street. The clearness of statement, the fluency of the verse, and the purely descriptive character of the contents furnish the least resistance to the easiest comprehension of the story. The current myths were presented without moralizing, and the entire field is well covered from the creation of the world to the apotheosis of Cæsar, and so there is completed the entire cycle of deistic expression. Like the *Æneid*, the *Metamorphoses* was left unfinished, though there are no incomplete lines. Judged by its reflective character nothing would have been added by another revision. Its fluency might have been increased at some points, or a rhetorical touch might have been added here and there, yet the introduction of a subjective or moralizing element would have been out of harmony with the objective, physically reflectional character of the work, and as the images are all complete, further decoration is unnecessary.

Marvelous indeed are the recorded transformations of men and women into trees or rocks, and into beasts or birds. From the story of Philemon and Baucis which was told to prove the power of the gods to change the forms of mortals there is no moral drawn; but it teaches the lesson of hospitality and not to be forgetful to entertain strangers; and the incongruous part is that they in their old age should have been transformed into trees instead of removed into the companionship of those whom they had befriended. Niobe still remains a monument of grief, and Atlas stands enstoned by the Gorgon's look. Arachne (the spider) still spins a web marvelous as that woven in the contest in which the maiden Arachne was proved inferior to Minerva. Romeo and Juliet are prototyped in Pyramus and Thisbe to whose tragic end the dark berries of the mulberry, originally white, bear perpetual witness. But side by side with this is placed the intrigue

of Mars and Venus without a thought of the incongruity of the juxtaposition. The wonderful ride of the young Phaëthon, son of the Sun, is a ride in comparison with which that of Paul Revere sinks into insignificance, for he galloped by farm-houses and villages, while Phaëthon swept past the constellations of the sky and universal devastation followed in his train. Time would fail to speak of more, though nearly all the work is wondrous strange. At a few points the current runs nearly dry, noticeably so in the account of the contest for the arms of Achilles, and in the demonstration of the philosophy of Pythagoras. Akin to the *Metamorphoses* but based on indigenous Italian material is the *Fasti* in which are set forth the reasons for the festivals of the first six months. As it is restricted to the Italian domain it does not have the sweep of the *Metamorphoses*, and the gods who figure there are still more unsubstantial than those of the larger work.

Professor Tyrrell speaks of "the rhetorical tinge with which the letters from the heroines are imbued and which recalls to our minds the *suasoriae* of the school of rhetoric." He also says: "The defect is less seen in the poems in which Ovid was more sincere, as in the 'Art of Love,' which was justly regarded by Macaulay as the greatest of Ovid's works, and which reminds Sellar of Byron's 'Don Juan' as a poem in which a true vein of real poetry occasionally mingles with cynical worldliness and warm sensuousness." But, as Lucretius says, it is in exile that the mask is taken off and reality is displayed, and it is rather to the works written during his exile that we are to look for that which shows Ovid at his best as a man. As we have shown, there is much in these works of objective facts. There is adulation of Augustus but we must not condemn him alone for expressing a conventional flattery to which even as independent a writer as Horace gives expression, and it certainly is not carried to the extent indicated by Boissier to a *delire d' adulation*. He does indeed use *divus* and *numen* freely, but these were little more than Lord and Grace are now. Over against this we may set the fact that Latin offers nothing more sincere than the poems to the friends who stood faithful when others fled, nor is there any strain of insincerity in what he writes of the dead who had been his friends at Rome, and the letters to the living, reflecting much of his surroundings,

are free from any mark of servility. Strangest of all, if we bear in mind the laxness of his earlier works, are the tones of his steadfast devotion to his wife. His own birthday he did not notice, but hers was the one day when he dressed in white. Her image rose before him as he lay sick without a friend to console or help him. Not the least part of what he wrote was directed to her, who if she had gained as herald a Homeric bard would be a second Penelope, would enjoy a reputation equal to his own, and so far as his heralding could avail should live forever in his song.

His literary appreciations are not few, though to us many of them are names and nothing more. The mighty-voiced Rabirius, the star-like Pedo, Severus who gave a royal song to Latium, Tuscus for whom you might believe the azure gods composed the song, Rufus minstrel of the Pindaric lyre, and Cotta light of the Pierides and defense of the forum were among his friends. Here also are given his mature views in regard to his earliest works and the references to these are not infrequent, and among them is an elaborate defence of the character of his works. Song and a mistake had been the cause of his fall. Of the latter he keeps silent as he does not wish to arouse again the pain of Cæsar.

Of his song he gives an elaborate defense. Ovid is not surprised that with his burdens of state affairs Augustus had not had time to unroll his *Art*; had he done so he would not have found the basis for an accusation. It was indeed not of severe front nor worthy to be read by a prince, and besides, his example was at variance with his precepts for his life was reverential; his muse was sportive, wanton he might have said, to a great extent fictitious and what he wrote as a boy, unwitting as to results, came to injure him when he was old.

In defense of his poetic attitude he passes in review many a Greek and Roman writer and shows that from Homer to Eubius, from Ennius to Propertius there was an erotic vein in Greek and Roman literature, and he had had no fears that he would be wrecked where all the others had safely sailed. He had avoided satire, had used no envenomed jests and yet he was the only one whom

his Calliope had injured. But his fundamental tone had been but an occasional one in their works, and in the harmony noticeable only to one who took especial pains to take note of it.

The character of Ovid is by no means a peculiar one. A literary artist without moral ideals, up to the time of his banishment he wrote on subjects with which for the most part he did not seek to identify himself nor did he have any desire so to do. He passed in review the mass of mythological lore that came to the Romans from the Greeks, and recounted the ways of gods but without any desire to assert eternal providence or justify the ways of God to men. He set forth without a blush the conventional immoralities of the day, and he did not take himself or his work seriously. It was not characteristic of the times to hold fast to the ancient landmarks. Cæsar, though pontifex maximus, in his speech on the disposition to be made of the conspirators with Catiline had favored as the severest penalty their distribution among the colonies; for death is an everlasting rest from all miseries. And even Cato, the typical representative of the old ways, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but based his plea for punishment on public utility. Soon followed the contest which effectually made way with the republic, and when in 27 B.C. the leading man in the state was recognized as Augustus the era of imperialism had begun. The restoration of the old morality was the ostensible design of Augustus and his most noted laws looked to the rejuvenescence of Roman morality. Ovid took those conditions as the moral substratum for his earlier work as though this was the type of a future permanent morality. In this Ovid was merely expressional, giving conventional morality in his earlier works, just as he expressed conventional religion in the *Metamorphoses*. In other matters he is also expressional, for at every turn we are reminded of some one else. He had a good memory for pictures as well as for words and both of these he used without scruple and without apology; nor need he have felt condemned for they were good and it was merely complimentary and indicative of his judgment that he should have selected ones so good. In his works written at Rome he merely mirrored the ways and thoughts of his own generation, and it is

only from his works written in exile that we have a revelation of himself, indicating the tenacity of his friendships, and that his was no mean personality. But the great mass of his work portraying the vanishings of the great moral and religious ideals of Rome fixes his place among the lesser poetic lights of Rome who offer to the world no expanding view of the persistence of triumphing ethical ideals.

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